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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 YEREVAN 000935

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SUBJECT: KOCHARIAN ON RADIO LIBERTY, NDI, HR CASES, IRAN

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Classified By: CDA R.V. Perina, reasons 1.4 (b,d)

¶1. (C) SUMMARY: In an almost 90 minute introductory call by the CDA, President Kocharian defended his positions on Radio Liberty, NDI, and human rights cases in a friendly but unbending manner. He was determined to move Radio Liberty broadcasts from state radio to a private network, but emphatically assured that Radio Liberty's broadcast schedule would be undiminished and unimpeded. The message on NDI was similarly mixed, in that Kocharian maintained his refusal to register NDI, which he characterized as an instrument of revolution, but at the same time promised that authorities would not interfere with NDI's activities and registration would be given only after the presidential elections. On Iran, Kocharian reaffirmed Armenia's need to have constructive relations, and his unwillingness to embarrass Iran with critical public statements. He said that he does raise international community concerns privately with Iran. The president said he was prepared to free Aleksander Arzumanian on bail if the investigation phase in Russia stretches on too long, but was completely unforthcoming about Levon Ghulyan. END SUMMARY

¶2. (U) ACTION REQUEST: Post requests that the Department and Embassy Prague consider providing a readout to IBB and RFE/RL officials in Washington (Gary Thatcher) and Prague (Enver Safir, Julia Ragona) on the substance of the Radio Liberty portion of this cable, as Embassy Yerevan lacks a secure channel to those officials.

LOOKING LIKE A BAD TREND, MR. PRESIDENT

¶3. (C) CDA told Kocharian that observers were growing dismayed by an array of worrisome issues: the seeming campaign to drive Radio Liberty (RL) off of state airwaves, NDI's continued non-registration, the arrest and protracted detention of opposition politician Aleksander Arzumanian, and the death in police custody of Levon Ghulyan. CDA suggested that, taken together, these issues could be viewed as a post-election rollback of Armenian commitment on democracy and human rights. CDA recommended prompt action from the president to resolve these irritants, especially RL and NDI, to allay these concerns and sidestep any risk of misperceptions.

A VIABLE ALTERNATIVE ON RADIO LIBERTY?

¶ 4. (C) CDA noted RL's long history and tradition as an independent media voice in Armenia, and the continuing difficulty IBB has had in concluding a valid contract with Armenian Public Radio. Kocharian made very clear, over the course of an extended discussion, that he is unswervingly determined that Radio Liberty will not be carried by Armenia's public broadcaster beyond August. He was equally firm, though, in promising that the private radio network alternative he put forward will not diminish RL's prominence in Armenia. He repeatedly asserted his personal guarantee that the private radio would maintain RL's current broadcast schedule, and that authorities would not interfere in any way to limit or reduce those broadcasts. CDA countered that the private channel does not have as much geographic reach as state radio. Kocharian argued that the difference in coverage was limited to remote villages where RL's audience is negligible.

¶ 5. (C) Kocharian insisted that the decision to shift RL from state to private radio had nothing to do with RL's editorial content, but was merely a matter of rationalizing the programming, in the face of new Russian pressure for Armenian Public Radio to give equal time to Russian broadcasts. Kocharian said it was impossible to deny Russia equal access to public radio. If both American and Russian broadcasts were allocated so much time, there would be little time for Armenia's own programming. At the same time, Kocharian complained bitterly about RL's editorial policy, which he considered "propaganda" aimed squarely against his government. He claimed that RL broadcasts had been "fine" until 2002, when new editorial management had taken on a resolutely anti-regime tone. Without citing a name, Kocharian said there was one man in charge of the editorial policy of the Armenian Service who indulged his own anti-government public opinion crusade against Armenian authorities. Kocharian said he had no problem with RL's criticism of him personally, and that spirited critiques of

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the president's policies are "normal," but that what really offended were RL's maligning of Armenian national values. Kocharian asked rhetorically why Armenia's public broadcaster should be required to air such diatribes.

¶ 6. (C) Kocharian said he had been careful not to make any changes to RL's broadcasting arrangements during the pre-election period, precisely because he did not want the issue to be linked to the elections. Now it is time to make the change. CDA promised to relay Kocharian's points, but noted that since the next elections are not that far off, many might make the same assumption about the current action.

NATIONAL DEMOCRATIC INSTITUTE

¶ 7. (C) CDA urged Kocharian to register NDI right away, commenting that his government certainly had nothing to fear from NDI. Regularizing the organization's status would be a cost-free gesture of good faith among NDI's many influential boosters around Washington. CDA observed that most outside observers assume automatically that non-registration is a form of harassment, and count this against Armenia's stated commitment to democratization. Kocharian should act to remove this black eye. CDA assured that NDI has no malign goals or activities in Armenia.

Kocharian argued passionately that NDI had been responsible for toppling governments in Georgia and Ukraine, and was determined to do the same in Armenia. The organization was an instrument of agitation and regime change, and Kocharian said he would not allow it to be registered until after the presidential elections. Kocharian named an NDI senior executive whom he said had nursed a years-long vendetta against Armenia's leadership and was determined to see the government toppled from power. He complained that NDI had worked tirelessly, if fruitlessly, to unify the political

opposition and galvanize it into a unified force capable of taking on the government. Kocharian would not be budged in his conviction that NDI's intentions, activities, and fundamental goals were targeted directly at the GOAM.

¶8. (C) CDA protested that he has known the NDI official for many years, and Kocharian was much mistaken in his assessment of his motives and ability to affect events. NDI certainly had not caused the popular uprisings in either Georgia or Ukraine. Kocharian was not buying. He insisted that NDI made itself a threat to Armenia's and regional stability, and said he had a constitutional responsibility to counter that threat. Kocharian insisted several times, however, that his government would do nothing to interfere with NDI's programs and activities as currently operating in Armenia. He urged CDA to let him know immediately of any specific allegation of GOAM interference with any NDI activities. CDA argued that this made little sense; if Kocharian intended to let NDI operate freely, why not get full "credit" for normalizing the NGO's status here? Kocharian remained adamant that the organization was free to operate but would not get the formal approval of registration.

HUMAN RIGHTS CASES: ALEKSANDER ARZUMANIAN AND LEVON GHULYAN

¶9. (C) The president said he is still waiting to hear the report of Armenian investigators working in Russia to uncover additional evidence of Arzumanian and his partners' money laundering activities. Kocharian said he was powerless to make the investigation in Russia go any faster, but he hoped soon to have an estimate from the investigative team of how long it was expected to take. If the investigation could not soon be finished and conveyed to the courts for trial, Kocharian said he would have Arzumanian released on bail until the case was prepared. Kocharian affirmed the importance of proper procedure, but noted that there was considerable evidence of criminal activity. The president commented that Armenia had passed its anti-moneylaundering law at U.S. urging and with U.S. advice, so it was ironic to find the U.S. Embassy now questioning its application. CDA urged that authorities make every effort to ensure the trial is speedy, transparent, and fair. Kocharian agreed that was his goal.

¶10. (C) CDA laid down a marker on our concern with the Ghulyan investigation, and hoped that it too would be resolved transparently. Kocharian maintained that the matter had been investigated, including by a team of international experts, and no impropriety found. Local human rights

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critics trying to make much of the case were indulging a vendetta against authorities. (NOTE: The international team mentioned was comprised of European forensic pathologists who performed a second autopsy on Ghulyan's remains. This second autopsy was essentially inconclusive on the substance of the dispute. It confirmed that Ghulyan most probably died of a fall from a height, but was unable to assess whether he jumped, fell, or was bodily thrown from a high point of the detention center. END NOTE).

IRAN: HAVE TO WORK WITH THE NEIGHBORS

¶11. (C) CDA raised our concern over Iranian FM Moutakki's visit to Yerevan earlier that day, and what it implied for Armenia's overall relationship with Iran. This was no time for "business as usual" with Iran, as Iran defied UNSC Resolutions and pressed forward on its illicit nuclear programs. This is a very sensitive issue in Washington, and anything that smacks of new or deeper engagement will simply not be understood. While we understand that Armenia cannot help but have some relations with its southern neighbor, it is very important that Armenia also show itself to be on the side of the international community. CDA said that Armenia

could be helpful in communicating the international community's messages to senior Iranian leaders.

¶12. (C) Kocharian demurred, saying there was nothing to be gained by public statements that Iran would just find humiliating and enraging during the course of a visit. He affirmed that Armenia does deliver the concerns of the international community quietly to Iranian leaders, with due discretion for Iranian sensitivities. Kocharian reiterated that Armenia has its own critical national interests at stake in having trade and energy relations with Iran, and it was his duty to protect those interests. Kocharian opined that rhetoric now coming from the international community was counterproductive to the goal of winning Iranian compliance with its nuclear obligations. Direct dialogue would be preferable to public broadsides. CDA reminded that there have been many attempts, especially by our European partners, to resolve the problems through diplomatic dialogue. He reiterated that this was not an issue of bilateral U.S.-Iranian confrontation, but the unified policy and effort of the international community to bring Iran back into compliance with its obligations.

¶13. (C) Kocharian said that Moutaki had spoken positively of recent contacts between U.S. and Iranian representatives on Iraq. CDA said he had no information about the content or tone of those conversations, but Armenia's growing relationship with Iran remained an increasing concern in Washington.

COMMENT

¶14. (C) Kocharian's warm welcome and affable style belied his generally tough positions on each of the issues. His unfailing smile and likable manner did nothing to conceal stubbornly entrenched positions. We were struck by the vehemence of his repeated "personal guarantee" that Radio Liberty would be completely secure and protected from any kind of interference or diminished capability on the proposed commercial channel. We see little chance, however, of the president changing his mind about pushing RL off the state radio channel, given his determination on the point.

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